A STUDY OF YEATS' *A VISION*

BY

CARL FREDERICK BENSON

B.A., University of Texas, 1937
M.A., University of Texas, 1938

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH
IN THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF THE
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A STUDY OF YEATS' *A VISION*

The purpose of this study is to determine to what extent the philosophical system developed in *A Vision* and in other prose works is important in the interpretation of Yeats' poetry and to what extent it was important in the creation of that poetry. Other students of Yeats have been interested in these problems and some of the ideas advanced here can make no claim for originality; but no one has attempted fully to assess the place of *A Vision* as an integral part of Yeats' complete works. Most critics have been interested in discovering relations between specific passages of *A Vision* and specific poems. This search for one-for-one correspondences I have made too, but I have also sought to discover the central ideas of *A Vision* and to trace the development of these ideas from their inception in earlier works through the composition of *A Vision*. In other words, I treat *A Vision* as an arc in the completed circle of Yeats' career.

Chapter I, in addition to explaining the structure of the system more comprehensively than it has been explained heretofore, also demonstrates that the system is not so arbitrary as many have thought. It is true that the terminology (gyres, Creative Mind, Body of Fate, Will, Mask, antithetical, primary, *et cetera*) is singular; and discussion of individual human types in terms of lunar phases does at times become rather intricate. But the general concepts behind Yeats' terminology are common: man is more or less subjective or objective, more or less ruled by emotion or thought, more or less ruled by his own individuality, or by a conventional, group-held body of ideas. Within these basic concepts Yeats describes the figures who feature his discussion of human types. It is to be noted, too, that the system is bent to accommodate certain people just as much as certain people are interpreted so as to fit the system. Again, Yeats' cyclic history is no more arbitrary than, say, Spengler's, though it is far less elaborately worked out; both theories, as a matter of fact, seem to be based upon the same astrology. The only part of

the system that lies outside Western culture generally is some of the interpretation of life beyond the grave; and I have pointed out that though the system as enunciated in the two editions of *A Vision* makes use of an unusual vocabulary for discussing "discarnate life," Yeats' poetry makes only the most general application of this part of the system.

Chapter II is written on an assumption warranted by Yeats' statements, that the most important influences in his life were the early ones; and this assumption is borne out by analyses of the effects of his early knowledge of the occult, Blake, Shelley, Balzac, and of his personal relations with his father (John Butler Yeats), Maude Gonne, Synge, Lady Gregory, and others. These influences are variously treated; some are emphasized more than others. Thus, Balzac is treated in some detail because his importance for Yeats has never before been assessed. Madame Blavatsky, the occult generally, and the occult reading of Blake made by Yeats and Edwin Ellis are treated much more specifically than heretofore to indicate to just what extent there are verbal parallels and ideological analogues between the occult and *A Vision.*

I have suggested that it is misleading to consider *A Vision* as essentially a curious hodgepodge of esoteric lore. When it is placed beside the works of Sinnett, Blavatsky, or what descriptions are available of the secret organizations to which Yeats belonged, the book seems much less esoteric. In my opinion *A Vision* is a record of the compromise Yeats effected between deliberately acquired primitive spiritual ideals and the actual world he knew, or, in his own terms, between "justice and reality." The esotericism is undoubtedly there, but it is a path to the myths the poet needed for a centered world view in which there was still place for human dignity. There are various reasons for viewing the book as a compromise between the esoteric and the real world. In the first place, when the Yeats-Ellis study of Blake was completed in 1893, Yeats already had, except for the doctrine of the Mask, the fundamental structure of his system, and in much more esoteric detail; if evasive occultism had been all he wanted, he could

have stopped there. But Yeats was dissatisfied with the system thus stated, and his later reappraisal of Shelley and Blake indicates the source of his dissatisfaction. "Blake," he says, "was isolated by an arbitrary symbolism," whereas Shelley "was not a mystic, his system of thought was constructed by his logical faculty to satisfy desire, not a symbolical revelation received after the suspension of all desire."[1] Taking the structure of the early system of the Blake commentary as a basis, we see that the modifications Yeats made in later years were pretty consistently attempts to link the reality of natural life to the justice of a generally occult supernaturalism and philosophy. It is significant, I think, that the system is modified by Yeats' choice of human exemplars for his various phases, and that he omits from his poetry (always his chief concern) too occult details from his theories of life after death. His realization of the necessity to abandon some of the otherworldly ideals and all of the pseudo-mystic method of treatment of such ideals of his particular fusion of myths and occult sciences was assisted by his need to find solutions for the problems of the actual world, solutions that were forced upon him by such acquaintances as Maude Gonne, Lady Gregory, and Synge. The importance of the occult influences of his youth was attendant upon the shuddering evasion of his early verse; and though he always retained some of the ideals of his early years, since faith in some sort of permanency was necessary to him as a poet, he inclined more and more towards meeting the world in realistic terms. Finally, the view of *A Vision* as a compromise between the occult and the real delivers us from a common but awkward critical position: that Yeats was a bit mad but the greatest modern poet, that he was a pretty thoroughgoing occultist and yet wrote sharply realistic poetry. In short, this view allows us to see Yeats' development as that of a single, integrated personality.

My only new contribution to the complex of literary influences lies in the discussion of the importance of Balzac. *Louis Lambert,* the work of Balzac to which Yeats most frequently refers, is built upon a conflict of Swedenborgian mysticism

and nineteenth century materialism, a struggle that is comparable to Yeats' imbalance between occult studies (which involved, among others, Swedenborg) and everyday life. It should be pointed out, too, that Louis Lambert is Balzac's *alter ego* — his Mask, in Yeats' terms; and Louis Lambert makes a study of the *Will* as the connecting bridge between materialism and mysticism. So Yeats, who read *Louis Lambert* "in his 'teens," early became acquainted with one of the key terms in his system.

It will be no surprise to Yeats' readers that I find *antithesis* to be the most important term in Yeats criticism. I have tried to show that antithesis is not simply a linguistic device but an habitual form of thought and I have shown that all the principal ideas of the system can be subsumed under this general heading. There has been some disagreement about the function of antithesis in Yeats' poetry, and Yeats' ambiguous diction is partly responsible. Actually, Yeats never achieved, nor wanted to achieve, a final resolution of his antithetical pairs. The strategy of his poetry and of his thought demands continual conflict between the permanent and the transient, the natural and the supernatural. Consciousness itself is defined in terms of conflict, not knowledge; so that any unity can be at most a delicate balance between divergent aims, efforts, or thoughts. The fundamental antithesis in Yeats' poetry and thought lies between the world of natural man, who is susceptible to the wearing of time, and the world of the spirit in which the hopes of man are fastened to eternal objects or concepts. The true, the real, was not for Yeats the world of passions nor the world of spirit, but both; and the intensity of much of his later poetry is dependent upon his deliberate suspension between a wish for one world and an acknowledgment of the other, because he has not resolved his antitheses. Chapter III is a discussion of the chief terms in which antithesis presented itself to Yeats; and Chapter IV, an analysis of a group of poems to demonstrate how the system was functional in the creation of his poetry, is principally concerned with the playing against one another of the antithetical pairs in Yeats' verse.

It would be folly to credit the system with what is common in human experience — the hopeless aspiration for and love of the permanent; but the system provided Yeats with new terms in which to express the old aspiration, and it did so at all levels. The psychology gave him a dynamic way of verbalizing not only his own human plight, but also the plight of his friends, enemies, and the ideal characters that he created. The sweep of his history (shallow though it may be) provided him with a vision of races, cultures, nations, epochs, set against one another in imaginatively valid conflicting terms. His perpetual search for a religion that he could feel as new drove him to accept as equal in value accepted Christian formulations and Greek or Indian myths; and no matter what we may think of the paganism of his old age, or of any of his intermediate stages, the search was always his own — he was always seeking his own vision of reality. And since whatever he sought was for the sake of his poetry, his varied explorations are reflected in his verse with an individuality and freshness of language that set him apart from other poets of his time.

In his early poetry, as many have noted, Yeats was an escapist, with whatever derogatory connotations that word may carry. He rejected the actual world simply by avoiding it, by retreating into a fairyland. In later life Yeats persisted in rejecting the world of materialistic science; but the thought that went into the system provided him with a rejection that was not a pained shunning of unpleasant fact; it was rather a rejection based upon his coming to close quarters with men and ideas he admired or loved or hated. Shuddering avoidance became positive rejection; and this change is mirrored in his language, which became more and more assured — a language which comprehended the materialistic world even while rejecting it.

VITA

Carl Benson was born in Camden, Arkansas, February 19, 1916. He attended grade and high school in Waldo, Arkansas, and junior college at Magnolia A. and M. He was graduated from the University of Texas in 1937 and received his M.A. degree from the same institution in 1938. After another year of graduate study, he taught for two years, 1939-41, at Arkansas A. and M., (Monticello). In 1941 he came to the University of Illinois as Assistant in English. He served three years, 1943-46, with the U. S. Army, and returned to Illinois to complete his doctorate. He now teaches at Alabama Polytechnic Institute. He is married and has one child.